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ABSTRACT

The professor who elects to offer instruction in one of the nation's prisons will be a paradoxical figure representing society's mainstream values to those individuals he is seeking to aid. Prisoners often harbor the belief that they are being dealt with too harshly and that they are being victimized unjustly. This point of view can be exploited to great advantage in the teaching of composition. Inmates crave an audience, and a professor representing mainstream society is the perfect audience for "spilling their guts." A composition course calls for active participation and meaningful statements. The topics for assignments that work best give the inmate-student the opportunity to discuss his plight and voice his resentments. The instructor is well advised to commend a writer for expressing his views and reserve criticisms of early compositions, which tend to be radical. Another reality of prison life must be confronted: discipline, which may be the most serious aspect of teaching in prisons. Prisoners tend to resent authority and utilize tactics of intimidation. Prison instructors will face apprehension, but an air of assurance and confidence, even if feigned, is essential. Although teaching in prisons can be satisfying, it is a challenging and difficult environment to which some instructors, once out, prefer not to return. (HB)

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THE COMPOSITION INSTRUCTOR AND THE INMATE-STUDENT: Utilizing Prisoner's Attitudes

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THE COMPOSITION INSTRUCTOR AND THE INMATE-STUDENT: Utilizing Prisoner's Attitudes

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The professor who elects, for whatever reason, to offer instruction in one of the nation's prisons--especially a maximum security prison--will be, by most accounts, a paradoxical figure to those individuals he or she is seeking to aid. In the eyes of the inmates, the professor is a representative in the most obvious and profound way of the society that the inmate has, for one reason or another, chosen to reject. He or she is the carrier of society's values, the very epitome of the conservative thought process; or, conversely, the professor is the essence, if you will, of do-gooder liberal thinking, the idealist who envisions for all of us a better society than is perhaps possible, but one who, surely, wishes to tamper with the way things are. Admittedly, most of us probably fall somewhere in between these two poles. Still, from the inmate's point of view, the professor in prison is the courier and transmitter of society's values, whether deemed desirable or undesirable.

At the same time, the prisoner--especially the hard-timer--is usually behind bars because he rejects or harbors outright disdain for society's values. He often finds members of the larger society hypocritical, duplicitous, materialistic, and self-serving. He rightly views the professor as a product of the society that has condemned him to a cage for a large portion of his life. (As a point of information, I am referring throughout this paper to the typical male prisoners whom I have taught.) However lenient and/or ineffective we on the outside feel our penal system may be, no matter how strongly we believe our court system to be der-

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elict in dealing with those whom we consider to be undesirables, we can rest assured of one thing: the view from the other side of the bars is totally different. Prisoners often harbor the belief that they are being dealt with TOO harshly, that THEY, not we on the outside, are the victims of misbehavior.

Fortunately for the professor behind bars, this other point of view can be exploited to great advantage in the teaching of composition. Inmates crave an audience--any audience; and the professor--that representative of the larger society--is the perfect individual to whom they can "spill their guts." Everyone in society has a particular ax to grind, an inmate will readily tell you; but the professor, while being a product of society, is also, supposedly, the paragon of objectivity, the very pinnacle of rational thought. No one, thinks the inmate-student, offers so good an audience for having his story heard, understood, appreciated, and sympathized with as the professor--unless, of course, it is the inmate's cellmate; but he's heard the story a thousand times and doesn't want to hear it again.

What could possibly be better for the composition professor: students who are taking a writing course because they want to, not because they "need it for graduation," and students--the same ones--who have something meaningful to say. Add to this the fact that these students will quite probably offer insights from a perspective that the professor will almost certainly not get in a traditional classroom; and, seemingly, the professor has reached Writing Master's Nirvana.

Inmates tend, for the most part, to be outspoken and assertive. This

characteristic serves the professor well, since he or she has ample opportunity to discover the inmates' concerns. In other words, it is not difficult to get a verbal skirmish started. And we all know that out of such classroom discussions, we often reap our best student responses.

Of course, to elicit meaningful responses, the writing instructor must assign or allow students to write on meaningful topics. In show biz it's called "playing the audience." Mark Twain knew that, for he had the Duke and the Dauphin playing their audience in Huckleberry Finn. If you remember, they had all the fools in town on their side, and that, they allowed, constituted a significant majority of the people in **any** town.

The inmate-student is often no fool, however. He's been through the court system--usually more than once--and the penal system--again, usually more than once; and he has contemplated his situation as few students in our traditional classrooms have contemplated theirs.

Obviously, such topics as "How I Spent My Summer Vacation" or "Leaving Home for the First Time" have little meaning for the inmate-student. In fact, such topics (although I AM being somewhat facetious) are likely to elicit resentment or reinforce the notion that professors aren't really, after all, in touch with reality and that they, too, are just "serving their time." What works best, I have found, is what was suggested above: topics that give the inmate-student the opportunity to discuss his plight, voice his resentments, or present his case about the injustice of whatever.

In other words--and this surely goes without saying--the relevance of the topics suggested for the inmate-student should at least equal the relevance of topics offered to students in conventional classes. The writer prefers to write on something that he knows and feels strongly a-

bout--in this case, "the system," of course. Is the parole system really effective? Is it worth saving? Is equal justice under the law really possible? Is it put into practice? Is a "fair and impartial trial" really possible? Such topics as these will get the students writing--which is a composition professor's first task. Later, after the inmate student has assurance that his views will be taken seriously and that the professor will, in fact as well as theory, deal objectively with his thoughts, topics more personal and more revealing--and, from the professor's point of view, much more interesting--may be assigned, provided other, non-personal topics are available for any who wish not to talk about themselves. These personal topics may range from "Would you do it again?" "Why do you think you did what you did?" "What was your greatest mistake?" (The answer to that, of course, is, invariably, "Getting caught.")

One must always anticipate that such topics will often result in compositions that are intended to shock the reader and that facts may be "gussied up" a bit. However, the professor who will talk with these students honestly and openly, who will demonstrate that he or she is able to reserve judgment and not condemn an inmate simply because he has been found guilty by a jury and given a demeaning label by society will find that his or her students will virtually demand an audience during breaks and before and after class. In other words, if a professor can progress beyond prison garb, prison smell, and prison habits,that professor will find that students there will react pretty much as they act anywhere--after the initial intellectual and emotional skirmishes are over. For the alert professor, these informal conversations are often worthwhile beginning points for thoughtful themes.

Much more so than compositions written by our traditional students, early themes written by inmates are probes, not by the professor, but by the students. They tend to present radical, anti-establishment views, mainly, I believe, for the purpose of determining the "tolerance level" of the instructor. The instructor, then, is well advised to commend a writer for expressing his views and reserve his or her professional criticism for the mechanics of the composition, ignoring much of the content of the essay. I have found that I must pretend to take seriously all that is written while actually remaining somewhat indifferent to it. But perhaps I'm doing inmate-students an injustice by suggesting that they would tell "untruths" in their compositions. Let me just suggest that many of them are used to relying on very fertile imaginations. But the fact that they want to test their professor should be taken for granted.

When the inmate-student discovers the tolerance level of the instuctor, he, ideally, will see the class as a "safe" place to present ideas he has probably expressed to fellow inmates but has had no opportunity to voice to any member or the "establishment" until now. What the casual observer of the prison situation may not realize is that the prisoner is extremely isolated from everyone--he has no sounding board for his ideas except his fellows, and they, as one may expect, harbor prejudiced views. So the early theme topics shamelessly exploit this situation.

While the selection of theme topics and theme-based discussions may be instrumental in contributing to the prison instructor's success, another reality of the prison environment must be confronted: discipline. In fact, classroom and individual discipline may be the most serious aspect of teaching in a prison that the prison professor has to face. I

think it's safe to say that the professor may expect intimidation. The inmate's world is a jungle where the law of survival of the fittest operates, either overtly or covertly. But that it exists there can be no doubt. Thus intimidation is a very real phenomenon in a prison environment. Guards use it; prisoners use it. Teachers use it, too, of course: they carry their grade books to class, sometimes as an obvious symbol of their authority.

As one may expect, the prisoners often resent authority. After all, society's authorities have put them where they are. At the same time, they have a healthy respect for authority. They know that the professor wields a power over them. A write-up from a professor could possibly ruin a chance for early parole or a transfer to a more desirable situation. In a way, the prison professor holds the prisoner's future in his hands--and prisoners know it.

The end result of these factors is, then, a kind of psychological warfare, with the prisoners probing to find the professor's weaknesses, testing the professor's limits, exploiting the professor's indecisions. The sneer, the unexpected laughter, the question blurted out at the wrong time, the little disturbances that tend to be distruptive are all tools of the trade for the ones who wish to intimidate the instructor. And sometimes they are quite effective.

I've been asked time after time, "Aren't you afraid in there, being locked in with killers?" The answer is, "No." And that's true: I've never been afraid. However, I'd be misrepresenting my feelings if I did-not confess to a bit of apprehension at times.

One must enter a prison class with assurance, with bravado--feigned or

otherwise. One must also be over-prepared, having enough material to keep the class busy until the end of the class period. Of course, a theme assignment is one way to keep the class busy. I recall the first time I met a prison class. I told the inmates that as far as I was concerned it was just another college class, that they should act like college students, and I would treat them as such.

Later, I gave a writing assignment. While the class was writing, I sat in the only empty seat in the room--nearly exactly in the middle of the room--and read a magazine. For all practical purposes, I ignored the men, unless one had a question for me. As I discovered later, this behavior was the best possible move I could have made. The men felt that I trusted them, felt relaxed with them, and that I was an experience jailhouse professor. Prior to the next meeting, a small group of men met me outside the classroom. After a brief conversation about nothing in particular, one inmate asked me how long I had been teaching in prison. I told him that this was my first experience and asked him why he had asked the question. He shrugged and replied, "You acted like a pro." I took that as a real compliment.

Another professor, a big man about six feet four, lasted one meeting. He was nervous and showed it. The inmates took great pleasure in telling me later how they had run this fellow off. He didn't go back. Another professor told about a stabbing that took place in the next room. No one seemed particularly concerned. The members of the class watched the proceedings with interest and then went back about their business. To them, it was just another day in jail, with, perhaps, an interesting diversion for a few moments.

Teaching in a prison can be a challenging, rewarding, frustrating,

and exhausting experience. All teaching is. But in the prison environment, one works with known losers. The professor's first task is that of convincing himself that the students are deserving of his or her sincere efforts. The professor must learn to view the inmates as college students. He or she must show a much greater level of patience and tolerance than one would normally show. At the same time, the professor must maintain a tight control over the class members. A disruptive remark is often best met with a look of feigned impatience--the "I-can't-believe-you-made-that-silly-statement" look. I can almost guarantee that the other members of the class will subject the would-be offender to mild ridicule.

I found much satisfaction in teaching in a maximum security prison. However, as in the cases of many of the men I taught, now that I'm out, I prefer not to go back.